

JOHN 4: 1-42
WOMAN AT THE WELL

To begin, I ask you to close your eyes and ask that God's Spirit will open us to the truth of the living Word that will flow from this passage, washing over us, filling us to the brim and overflowing. Ask God for that now.

For what do I thirst, and for what does my heart long?
With your eyes still closed, ask yourself:
What are the empty and dry places inside me?
For what does our church thirst?
What are the empty and dry places in our world?

Amen

Let me introduce myself to you. My name is Anna. You know me as the woman at the well. Somehow, my name never got mentioned when the man you call John wrote my story. Having someone write about you is flattering....and I'm glad that people all through the ages have been able to read about the day that changed my life....but

Just in the same way as – well – have you ever been interviewed by a newspaper? Or been at an event, and then read what someone else wrote about it? It's not that it's not the truth....it's just that you'd have said it differently. You know? And I DO wish he had used my name.

That's why I welcome the chance to speak to you today and tell you in my own words the marvellous, most amazing thing that ever happened to me.
It was about the 6th hour...you call that noon.
The day was hot and dry, I remember that.

I had gone to draw water at the community well. Women were the ones in our time who were the water carriers. It was women's work to get the water and provide it for the household. Sometimes when I made that long and heavy walk, I'd think about that, and I'd think of all the stories from our sacred writings. I'd think about how providing for the people was the job of women – and how God, all through the sacred writings, is the One who provides water. That made me feel good, and I'd think of it often as I walked with the heavy water jug on my head.

I had a lot of time to think, too, because I always went in the heat of the day, when everyone else was inside, out of the sun. I was an outsider in that town – no one really accepted me, and so it was easiest to just stay away from them as much as I could.

That day, I remember, the sun was hot – very hot. And the land was dry. I was thirsty, and tired. I went to draw water, with an empty vessel. I WAS an empty vessel. Nothing and no one filled the hollow place inside me.

I had had five husbands.

The first of them, my parents chose for me. I was 12. His land was next to my father's land, and it had been a good business deal. He divorced me, though, because I could not bear children.

The next....the next of my husbands I loved very much. I didn't think it was possible to feel that way about a husband. I hadn't expected to find love like that. He took a chance in marrying me because it wasn't a good thing in our culture to marry a divorced woman. But he loved me, too. As much as I loved him.

He died.

Then, it was his brother's legal obligation to marry me. He did, unwillingly, but then traded me to his younger brother for some livestock. In the end, that next brother, my third husband, was killed in battle. The next was a man who was not of our culture, and that was a mistake. Not because of his culture, but because I married him out of fear. Fear of being alone. Fear of being incomplete – fear of starving. A woman alone in my country has no means of making a living. She is often attacked....you can imagine.

So yes, I married him out of fear. Soon, we both knew it was a mistake. He...he was so angry...and he moved back to his own country, and refused to divorce me. All it would have taken is for him to write out a writ of divorce saying I was an unsuitable wife....but he refused. And of course I couldn't divorce him.

So here I was....still legally married to someone who lived miles away, and so....I lived with my friend. You know how it is when you're empty and you think that someone – a relationship – will make you whole? It never works, does it? I learned that the hard way. I don't know how it is for you, but I was still empty. As empty as the water jug I had brought to the well.

On the edge of the well, sat a man. Obviously a Jew. I ignored him, because I was sure he would ignore me. That's how it was between Jews and Samaritans, men and women. But he surprised me. He said "Give me a drink"

I was really surprised. Shocked, in fact. A man in my time did not lower himself to speak to a woman in public....and more than that, Jews do not speak to Samaritans, much less touch us and drink out of our cups!

I said "you are a Jew – how can you ask me – a Samaritan and a woman, for a drink?" Honestly, I don't know where I got the courage to speak – in the presence of men, I was trained to speak only when spoken to, and never as boldly as that. But on second thought, I DO know where I got the courage. It was from HIM. He spoke to me politely, and he looked at my face. Into my eyes. And he smiled. He gave me courage – he made me feel....good. Able to speak. And you know that's a wonderful gift. *And if he had done nothing else that day, that in itself would have been enough. He helped me find my voice.*

He replied: "what's your name?"

I told him: "Anna. My name is Anna"

"If only you recognized God's gift, Anna, and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would have asked him instead, and he would have given you living water."

Well, that made me wonder. He seemed so nice, so sure of himself, but was he a little – you know – crazy? There ARE such people wandering around, and you can't be too careful. I had enough problems, truly. And I did not need to get involved in something like that. So I said (a bit sarcastically, I confess)

“Sir, you do not have a bucket, and this well is deep. Where do you expect to get this living water? Surely you don't pretend to be greater than our ancestors Jacob, Leah and Rachael, who gave us this well, and drank from it with their children and their flocks?”

He said “Those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty. No, the water I give, shall become a fountain within them, leaping up to provide eternal life”

When he said that, it seemed to make sense. Maybe he WAS crazy, but I was so empty, and I felt I had nothing to lose. I asked: “Give me this water, sir, so I shall not grow thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water”

The man said: “Go, call your husband, and then come back here”

Go to a husband – go to one who fills my heart? I had no place to go. I turned to him, and said: “I have no husband.”

Then he looked into my eyes with the kindest look I have ever seen – as though he saw my pain and my emptiness – without a trace of judgement – as though he were looking into my heart – and he said “the fact is, you have had five, and the man you are living with is not your husband. What you said is true.”

I couldn't believe it! I said, without thinking: “Sir, you are a prophet.” Someone who can hear the cries of our empty hearts, One who can draw out the truth buried deep inside us as water is drawn from a deep well, is no ordinary person. “Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but your people claim that Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship God.” He told me more.

“Believe me, Anna, an hour is coming when you will worship God neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem. Worshippers will worship the Creator in spirit and in truth. Indeed, it is just such worshippers the Creator seeks. God is Spirit, and those who worship God must worship in Spirit and in truth.”

Could it be? He sounded so sure, and I had an overwhelming conviction that this man was not only who I had been waiting for, but who we all had been waiting for. I didn't dare say it, but I hinted at it... “I know there is a Messiah coming...and when he comes, he will tell us everything”

He said “I, who speak to you, am he. I am”.

I am?????

I know the scriptures. I know who says “I am” What is he saying? Is it possible?

But just as I had grasped what he said, some men came up. Friends of his. They were bringing food from the village...they must have seen us talking. They looked at me...they didn't say anything...just stood there and stared. Then the most amazing thing happened as I stood there and they stared. Whether they spoke or not, I knew I had to. It was as though he had filled me with that water he spoke about....and I was just spilling over. It bubbled up, soothed and lubricated my vocal chords, and the words just poured out of me.

I ran back into the town and said to the people “come and see! Come and see someone who told me

everything I ever did. Come and see someone who knows the truth. Who filled my emptiness and can fill yours. Come and see!”

And I say the same to you.

All of you – come to the well. His gift is living water. He IS living water. One who touches this water will never be thirsty. One who bathes in this flood will be cleansed. The water he gives will become a fountain within them, leaping up to provide eternal life.

The man who talked to me at the well never came back to our town, but I told others about him, and they came to believe and to have their emptiness filled and their thirst quenched as well.

I now invite people to my home. Not one had ever been there before, but that doesn't matter anymore. Because of him. And I tell them of the living water welling up within me, of what it means to be washed in this water so that there are no more distinctions among us, separating Jew and Samaritan, slave and free, male and female. I tell them what it means to worship in Spirit and in truth. I bake bread, bless and break it for my brothers and sisters.

The man never came back to our town

But the Living Water is among us still.